blaze

By

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Chairperson John Hachmeister

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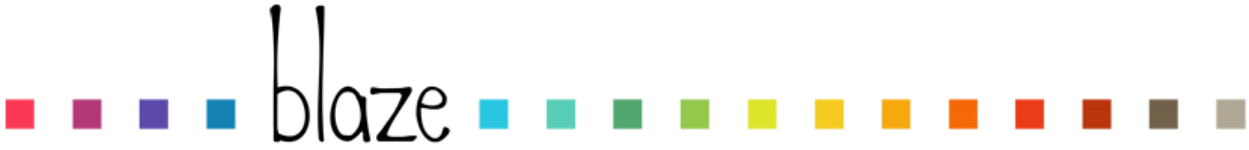

Transformative visual cypher-landscapes navigated by human interaction. My work is a system of trails and paths meant to be followed through signals of texture, number, and color. Within the work are solutions which depict our natural landscape at its purest – untouched by human civilization. On the journey to solve, the forms are ever-changing and take on infinite visual combinations defined by manipulation.

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Blaze: a colored marker placed on a trail to verify a path

Often located a practical distance apart, blazes become beacons of relief when one is feeling lost or off trail. Although rarely signifying an exact location within the trail system, they reassure that the correct path is being travelled.

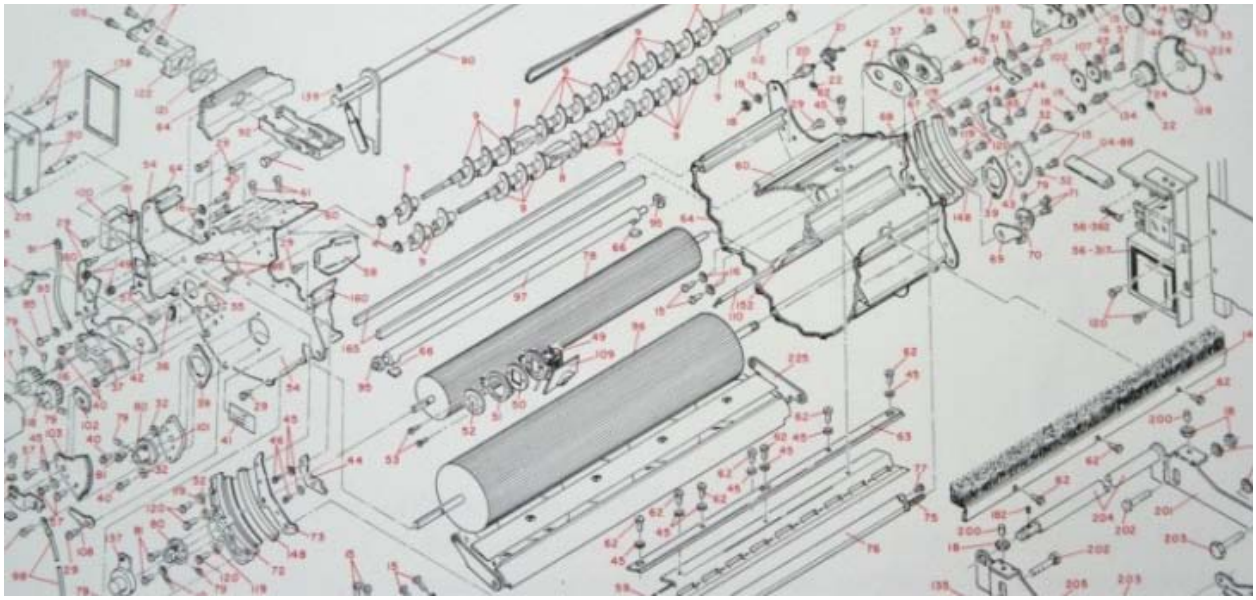
This exhibition contained two separate directional systems, each with their own unique visual blazes. One system, the island, is a journey of pattern, repetition, and patience containing a series of trail markers which become the landscape in which the trail inhabits. When the initial code is deciphered, the path becomes instinctual to follow. The other system, the column, requires technical, intellectual, and exact navigation through multiple visual cypher-landscapes (cypherscapes). Vague direction causes moments of lost until the next blaze is discovered; reminiscent of hiking a snow-packed trail or through a misty forest.

The fundamental foundation behind my work is inspired by my love of rock climbing. It is the idea of solving an intellectual puzzle with every muscle of your body – the mind and body forced to communicate precisely within every inch of movement. This concept was initially brought into my work through the column; the physical manipulation and rotation of disks while visually solving a textural image. Since then the idea has grown into larger floor work, forcing an entire body to move while interacting with individual stacking pieces.

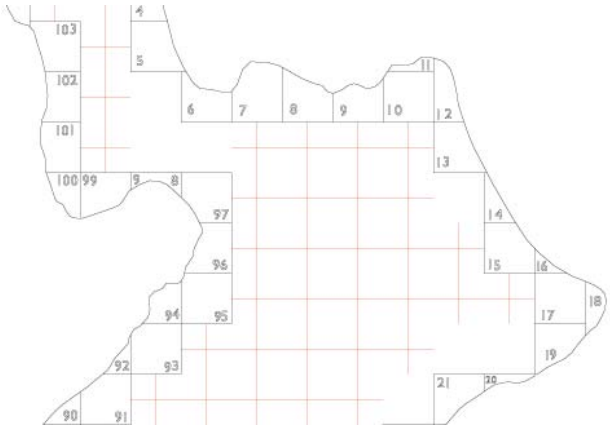
The puzzle aspect relates back to climbing or even the navigation of any path in nature. To break it down, there is a set topography of land like a mountain or cliff. Over time, humans created routes through these obstacles to overcome them in the easiest and safest manner. While one is not forced to use a specific trail or follow a created map, it's the recommended way to navigate through already explored areas. Similarly, my work is a journey of trail markers. Follow my path through these cypherscapes or choose to blaze your own – every direction leads to a new visual transformation.

To envision information… is to work at the intersection of image, word, number, and art.
Edward R. Tufte[1]

In Edward R. Tufte's *Envisioning Information*, he analyzes information design and presentation providing guidelines to aid in creating successful data structures. Whether these strategies are applied to statistical data, maps, mechanical drawings, or sculptures, Tufte's principles can help viewers understand multiple layers of complex information in effortless visual displays (like in diagram below).

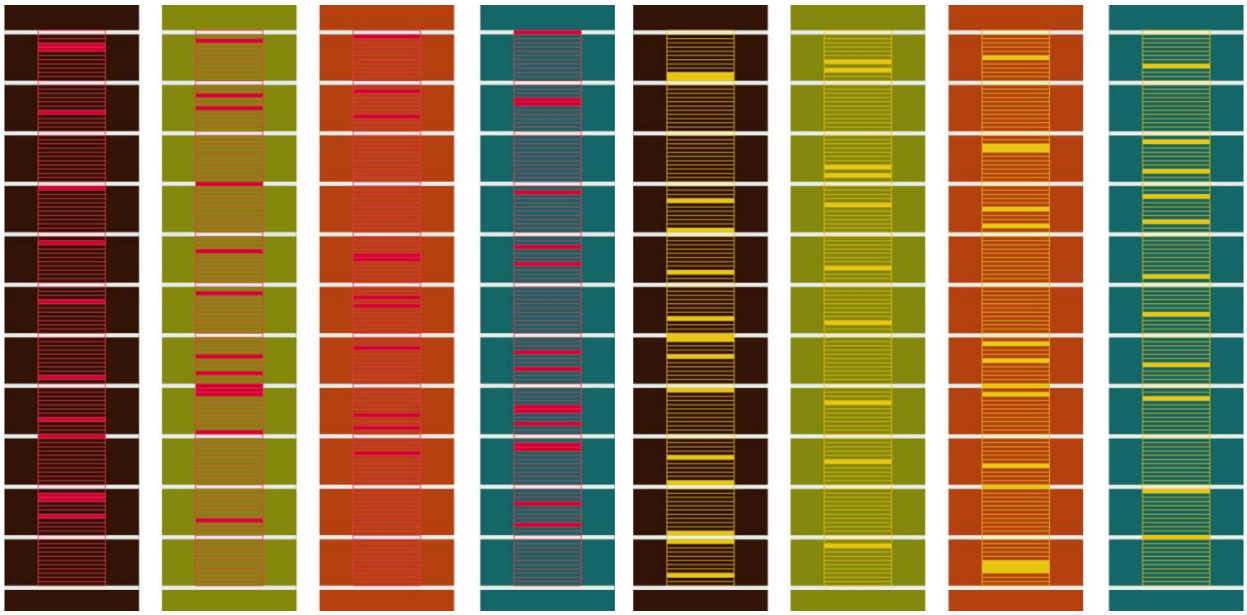


Taking Tutfe's values and applying them to my own work allowed me to create two highly complex three-dimensional displays of factual information in a visually compelling and comprehensible way. This information can be broken down into micro and macro scales, which allowed for the insertion of more data to help viewers clarify and organize the visual design. Tutfe suggests that a design organizes complexity through multiple and hierarchical layers of contextual reading while: numbers help link lists within the larger display, borders are kept for reference, and adding gridded/regular uniform data instead of clouds can help people identify within small regions. For the exhibition, all of these principles were taken into account, especially when designing the island. To clarify: a border was given for the pieces to fit within, numbers stamped in a clockwise order identified piece location within the larger layer, and a six inch grid was added to the entire landscape to aid in piece organization and placement.



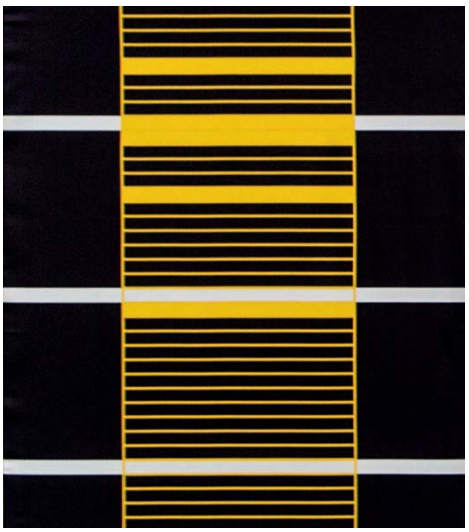
Noise is not music… Only on a quiet background can a colorful theme be constructed.
H. Windisch[2]

One of the major design components of the exhibition was color – without the strategic use of color, this vision would have never been successful. Tutfe notes that color is one of the best resources for distinguishing between layers and that it effortlessly differentiates between annotations and annotated. We can look at maps for example and how some maps are extremely successful at distinction between labeling, measuring, representation, and decoration. By studying large quantities of new and old maps as well as following Tutfe's examples, a unique kind of visual map was designed to aid in the reading of the column's cypherscape.

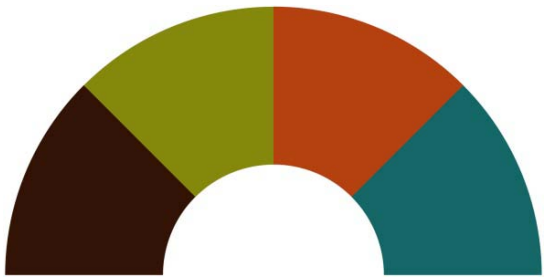


Different aspects of the exhibition used Tutfe map color principles such as:

1. Negative areas are also informative (black/white is also a value)



The outside negative areas of the visual maps are used as aids to help viewers understand which canvas relates to which colored column floor quadrant. The white stripes signify every foot of the built column, being a visual measuring guide without using numbered dimensions.

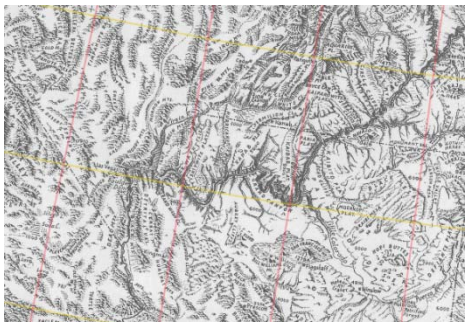


2. Calm colors against bright can avoid cluttering

Specific bright shades of yellow and red were chosen to contrast against the four dull colors of the canvases, the natural wood disks of the column, and the monochromatic nature of the United States reference map.

The color of the floor and the walls were taken into account early so that all selected colors would properly be seen and stand out on a white or black surface.

3. Use bright, pure, strong colors sparingly or between dull background tones



The United States reference map proved difficult to convey longitude and latitude lines because of the intricacy of the hand-drawn topographic features. Redesigning the lines and making them the bright yellow and red colors makes this map more user friendly.

4. Note the effectiveness and elegance of small spots of intense, saturated color for carrying information

Whether it was the small arcs of color placed between the wood disks of the column or the coordinate counters, small intense spots of color were strategically placed within the design to subtly steer viewers in the right direction.

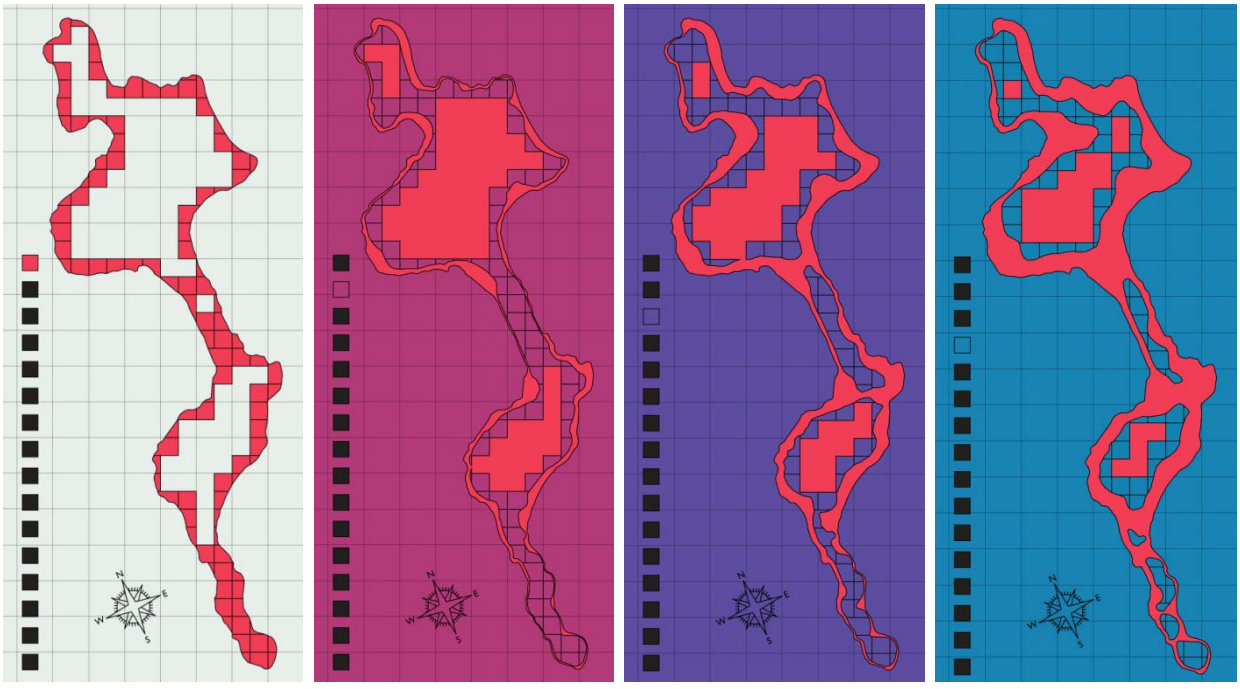
Following the color trail of yellow and red will lead you from the arcs to the canvases to the counters and finally to the United States reference map.

Several of these principles also were applied to the other half of the exhibition, the island. While less strategically intense, this work was highly complex to design in order to create a clear path to follow through 896 puzzle pieces. The easiest method found was to make each of the sixteen layers a different, vibrant color so it could be easily recognized and organized by the outside eye. Like mentioned above, numbers were then assigned in clockwise order and each piece was cut to fit within a six inch grid.

Although these steps seem like many hints at how to arrange the pieces, it was discovered that the use of a map was needed to aid in the final solution of the work. A series of sixteen postcards were designed

to accompany the work in the form of a key. This key could be held in hand or placed on the floor and used as a reference to every layer by identifying an individual piece and finding its shape within the key.

The sixteen maps were designed without the use of number or letter – there is the same color-based language present that runs throughout the entire island work. One can see that there is a red outline, signifying the first layer, highlighted on every map for sections of reference to what has been built underneath.

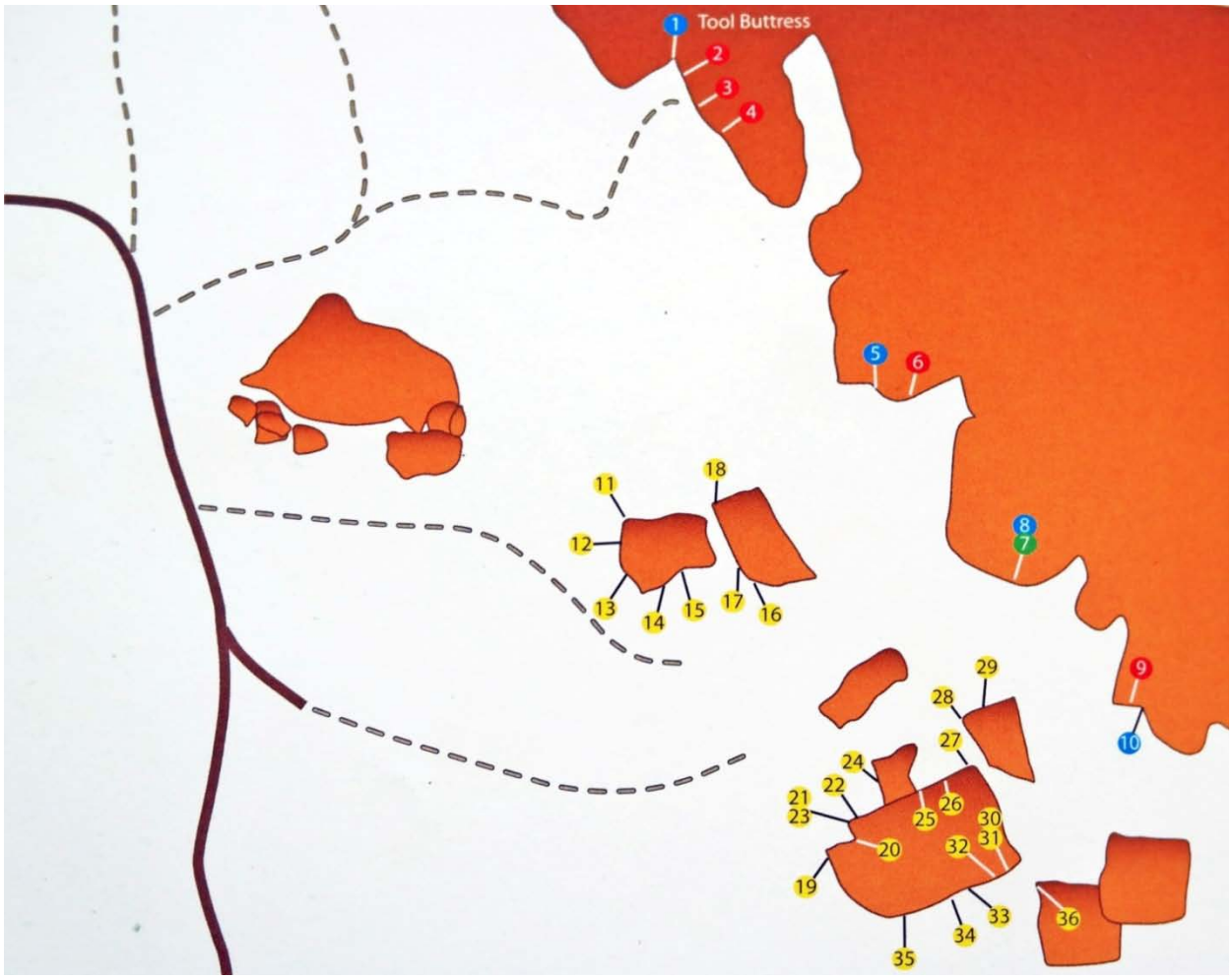


Clues to the solution are present on the maps like the overall gridding of the cards, which directly relates to the gridlines on the gallery floor. Also, the black blocks along the left hand side signify which layer in the series one is viewing as well as the show title's line of colored blocks on the gallery wall behind the work were in the order of colored layers. The compass on the cards is also accurate and one could use it to navigate within the space.

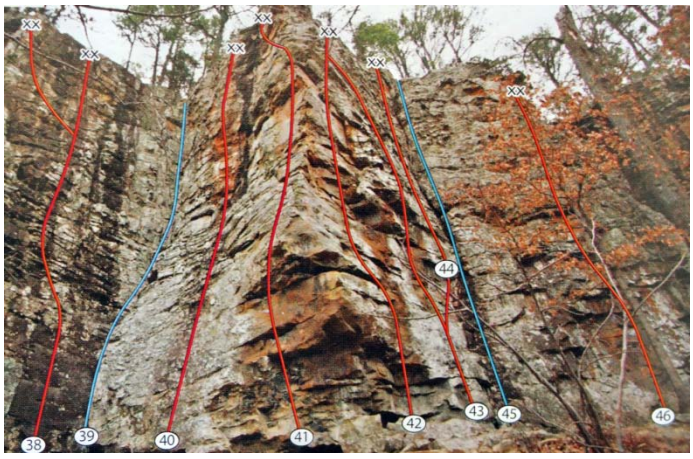
Navigation: to steer a course through a medium

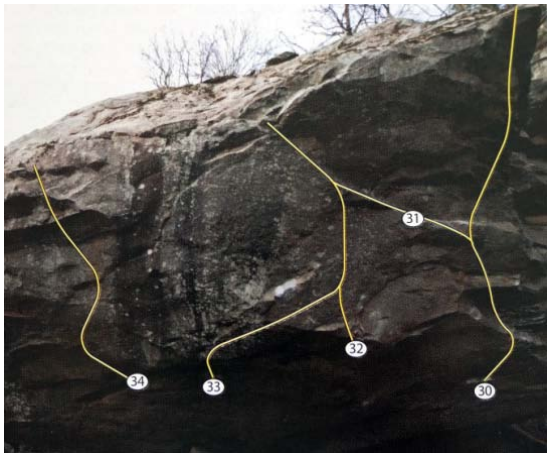
From the beginning, maps have been a constant source of inspiration for this exhibition. It is extremely important that the work is centered upon a factual topographic location that will be manipulated by human touch. These locations are picked because of a range of factors which can be narrowed down to two criteria: uncivilized by human development and awe-inspiring topographic features. While this work is not about making an environmental statement on human civilization, it does focus on how humans drastically change the environment around them to meet their needs. Therefore, it is fundamentally important to the work that the landscapes chosen are untouched by human civilization and then transformed into sculptural forms that encourage manipulation and creation.

When navigating a trail through a natural landscape, one observes their immediate surroundings while remembering the path behind. They search for landmarks or blazes that may be illustrated in a guidebook, map, or markers to lead them along the correct route. Similarly, the column can be navigated with the same system in mind: isolate an individual disk, compare it to the one above and below, and then rotate it to match looking for aid in significant textural markers. This will eventually lead to the topographic solution with little to no previous knowledge of the form beforehand, much like one's experience when exploring unknown outdoor trail systems.



Above and below images[3] show typical maps associated with rock climbing and hiking. These routes are often vaguely marked (if marked at all) and are found using landmarks or significant rock features. When studying the system of rock climbing, one finds that to navigate the route is to climb the route. Until you are on the wall feeling the rock, there is little to no instruction on how to reach the top (or the solution). The blaze column is reminiscent of this – having the experience be one of spontaneous textural feeling, each disk with its unique features becomes a piece of the larger solution.





My object is to depict the earth and at the same time realize a very high ideal of beauty of style.
Jules Verne[4]

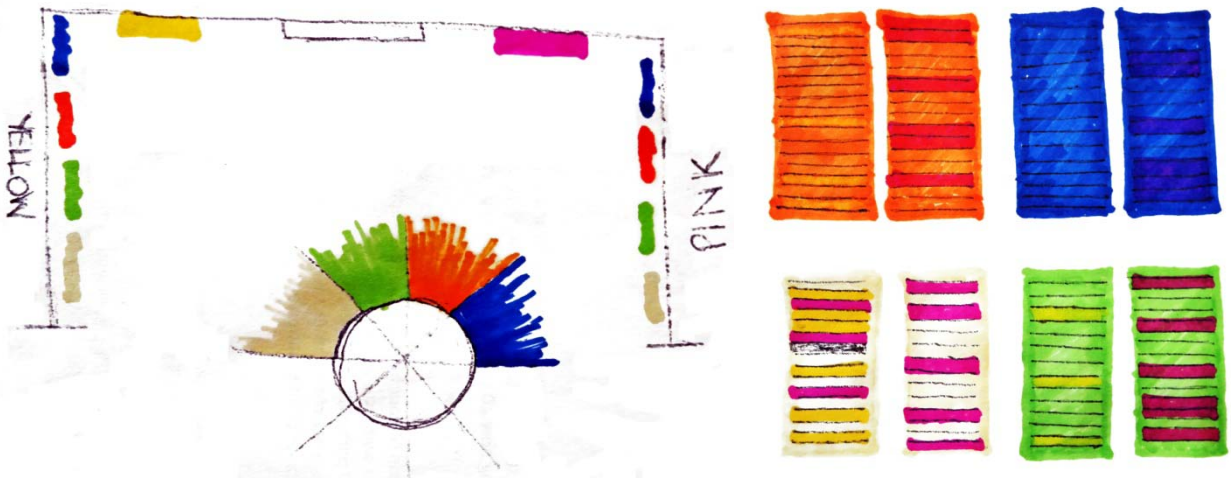
While *Envisioning Information* has been monumentally helpful in the organization and construction of the exhibition, the conceptual inspiration came from another brilliant researcher and visionary of his time – Jules Verne. Three books by Verne are the conceptual precedents of the exhibition: *Mysterious Island, Journey to the Center of the Earth,* and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. These Roman de la Science (novels of science) were revolutionary during Verne's time, although he only saw them as the perfect way to incorporate his love of scientific factual information into adventure novels. His aim was "to outline all the geographical, geological, physical, and astronomical knowledge amassed by modern science and to recount, in an entertaining and picturesque format that is his own, the history of the universe."[5] Studying the underlying formats that Verne used in these books allows one to follow the same creative path but apply it to sculpture.

Take *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, the plot as follows: A coded message is discovered in a book; the message leads to a real, mapped location on our Earth; this location then leads to an unexplored area beneath the surface that Verne has complete creative control over (minus scientific properties); the journey ends by the unexplored area connecting back to a real location on the surface. Subsequently using this method, the blaze column's second solution was designed and the steps are as follows:

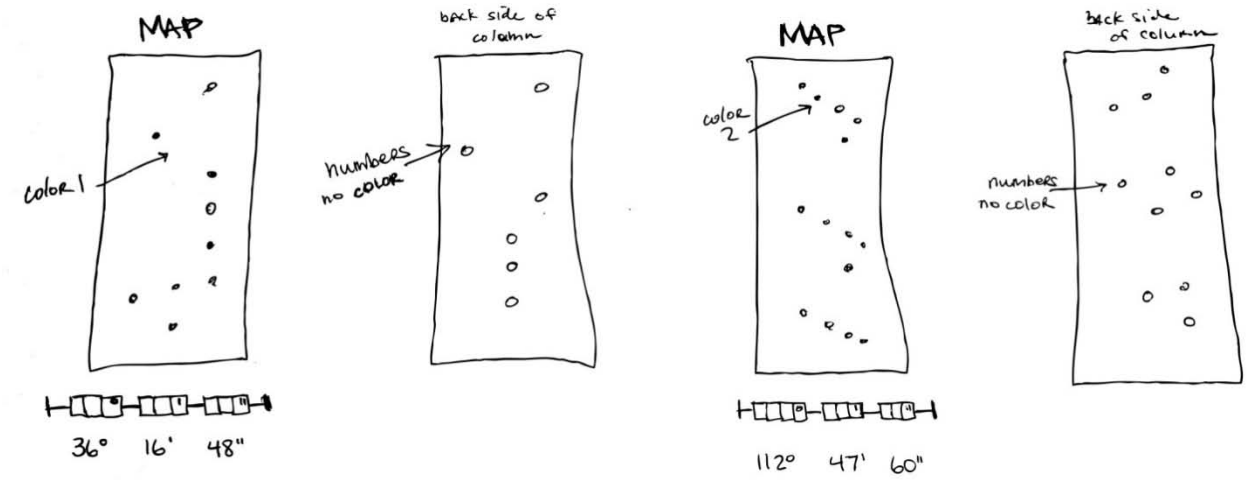
1. Real landscape → 2. Coded message → 3. Imaginary landscape → 4. Real location

1. The starting landscape is a series of rotating disks that can be aligned texturally to form a real, factual topographic location on known Earth.

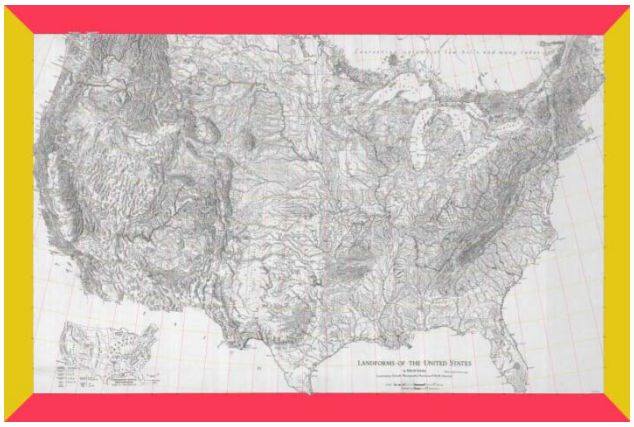
2. The coded message within this starting landscape is marked by yellow and red arcs hidden between the rotating disks and the associated visual wall maps.

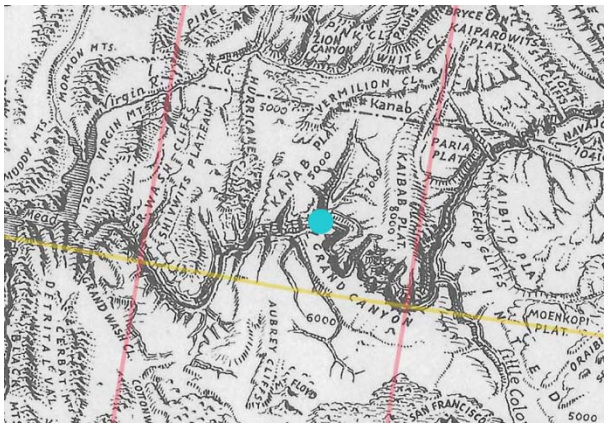


3. If one uses the coordinating colored canvases to align the colored arcs then a series of numbers will be uncovered. Through this process, the column appears as a pixilated, “imaginary” landscape.



4. These numbers are the coordinates to the real location of the column when it is solved texturally.





By studying and loosely implying Verne's method, the blaze column becomes an exceedingly deep observative and intellectual system. The journey is not meant to be easy or obvious; it is meant to be a navigation through adventure, mistrials, frustration, and intellect – just like in a Jules Verne novel.

Blaze, the exhibition, and the research behind it really pushed all fields of my education. The complex trail systems and cypherscapes that I designed were an extraordinary fusion of science, logic, technology, design, geography, information systems, and art. I aimed to make its interactivity accessible to viewers of all ages and educational experiences; parts were meant to be highly complex while at the same time possessing the ability to be very simple.

References

[1]Edward Rolf Tutfe. *Envisioning Information*. Connecticut: Graphics Press, 1990.
[2]H. Windisch. *Schule der Farbenphotographie*. Seebruck, 6th edition, 1958.
[3]Cole Fennel. *Rock Climbing Arkansas: Comprehensive Roped Climbing and Select Bouldering*. Colorado: Fixed Pin Publishing, 2009.
[4]R.H. Sherard. "Jules Verne at Home: His Own Account of His Life and Work". Translated by Zvi Har'El. *McClure's Magazine*, January, 1894.
[5]Evans, Arthur B. Jules Verne Rediscovered: Didacticism and the Scientific Novel. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988.

Blaze exhibition postcards (set of 16, corresponding to each puzzle layer)